

## **History of the 59th Medical Wing**

### **A Brief Synopsis**

What is now the 59th Medical Wing is a war baby, established on June 7, 1942 as part of America's mobilization. The original organization, called Station Hospital, San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center, was part of the sub-base of Kelly Field built on "the hill," a former bombing range. General Lackland, the Kelly commander, was the driving force behind the construction of the new facility. Work on the cadet center and its hospital began in mid-1941, before Pearl Harbor, as part of Uncle Sam's preventive mobilization while the rest of the world was at war.

The original facility consisted of ramped, framed mobilization buildings, built around the parade field (which is in its original location). The station hospital took on regional medical care missions as the war went on, and formed a base for both a convalescent depot and for training replacement officers shipping out for overseas. The station hospital had 1,500 beds by the war's end in 1945. The first baby was born in the station hospital in 1943. All of the original buildings have been demolished, but building 3450, now housing Biomedical Equipment Maintenance, was constructed in 1953 as the fire station for the original complex.

With demobilization after World War II, the cadet center became Lackland Air Force Base (named after Gen. Lackland mentioned above) and the station hospital remained as its medical support. The basic training mission began shortly after the war.

From 1942 to 1950, our ancestor unit was one of about 200 similar station hospitals in the country. In early 1950, it was downgraded to a dispensary, with inpatients going across town to Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC). In June 1950, when the Korean War began, the downgrading was tuned around so rapidly that no general order for it can be found in the records.

From a "sleepy hollow" dispensary, the station hospital became one of the busiest medical facilities in the defense establishment. The influx of Air Force enlistees caught Lackland by surprise and the base and its station hospital were augmented by tent cities.

There is no piece of paper that transformed Wilford Hall's ancestor from one of many station hospitals to the Air Force medical flagship, but the Korean War was the key. By the armistice in 1953, the temporary buildings around the parade ground were beginning to show their age. Plans were laid to move into a new modern building and the main WHMC building was opened in 1957. In addition, the first training program (for nurse anesthetists) was inaugurated in 1952. As a result of the upheavals of the Korean War, the installation was pointed on the way to becoming the Air Force's de facto central medical facility.

After the main building's construction in 1957, it was almost doubled in size in 1960 with the addition of the 500-bed training or "T" wing (now the "A" wing). Outside the main building, most of the temporary wartime structures remained in use, although they were showing their age. One by one, purpose-built buildings such as the Dunn and MacKown Dental Clinics and the troop dispensary, began to appear. A third construction effort, pushed through by then commander Gen. Myers, lasted from the mid-1970s through the early 80s, and doubled the main building once again. The new construction did not add beds, but gave us the clinic areas, the "D" wing and many other parts of the main building. When the new building program was complete, the functions conducted

in the shanty town of mobilization structures moved into the main building, and the old buildings were demolished.

Form and function continued over the next decades. After the Korean War, the hospital, then medical center, participated in all of Uncle Sam's highs and lows. The organization was deeply involved in the Vietnam War, with almost daily air evac flights coming in during that conflict. Some of the patients from the Beirut bombing and the Grenada operation came here. Perhaps the medical center's finest hour came on Dec. 20, 1989, when all of the patients from Operation Just Cause (Panama operation) came to San Antonio on five-hour's notice. Wilford Hall operated the Aeromedical staging facility at Kelly AFB and, of 231 patients, 131 came to Wilford Hall. The remainder went to BAMC. The Gulf War saw about a thousand Wilford Hall staffers deploying to set up the 870th Contingency Hospital at Royal Air Force Little Rissington, England, while the San Antonio contingent continued to operate short-staffed for three weeks until reservists came in to fill the vacancies. Wilford Hall's current field training facility was named Camp Rissington to recognize the hospital's contingency location in the early 1980s.

As the station hospital transformed itself into a central medical facility, changes in bricks and mortar were accompanied by changes in designation. After 1942, the organization went through an array of names and titles, settling on USAF Hospital Lackland in 1958. Recognition that we were more than a base hospital came with the redesignation as Wilford Hall USAF Hospital in 1965, and upgrading, at least in title, to Wilford Hall USAF Medical Center at the height of the Vietnam War in 1969.

In early 1993, the medical center was redesignated the 59th Medical Wing and Wilford Hall Medical Center became the title for the hospital. The organization remained the same as it had as a medical center.

About that same time, the organization began studies on the feasibility of transforming from the directorate/division/department/service structure which had been in place since 1942 to an objective medical wing structure in which commanders would be put in charge of assets and responsibilities based on product lines or mission elements. The proposal was studied over a period of five years. On April 1, 1998, the wing reorganized into the objective medical wing structure with the five groups and 20 squadrons we know today.

Today the medical center staff of 4,700 provides care for the over 1 million outpatient visits and 27,000 admissions per year with 312 staffed beds and a budget of \$210 million. The Wing has 3,227 mobility positions for Aerospace Expeditionary Forces and will be the lead organization for a theater hospital in Iraq beginning this Fall. The Wing also conducts over 600 research studies and trains more than 500 officers in 44 post-graduate medical and dental programs. Also, more than 400 officers or enlisted are trained in 20 allied health fields.

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